

Pilot Finally Can Tell of Impossible Jump

By BOB THOMAS
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TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) — As far

as the Air Force is concerned, U2 pilot Col. Jack Nole, 43, is alive through an act of God.

That is the only way it can explain his survival when his U2 disintegrated more than 10 miles above Southwest Texas.

Nole's parachute jump brought about an ejection seat for U2s, a better-designed parachute, improvement of oxygen supply equipment and allied items, and triggered new research into high altitude bailouts.

Nole is now deputy commander for maintenance of the 4080th strategic (U2) wing at Ravis-Monthan Air Force base.

On Sept. 25, 1957, he was a pilot flying out of Laughlin Air Force Base, Del Rio, Tex. At that time the U2s were one of the Air Force's most closely guarded secrets. Nothing leaked out about his fantastic jump from 53,000 feet. Only recently was Nole given permission to reveal the details of what happened six years ago.

At 3:15 p.m. 25 miles from Del Rio, and 53,000 feet up, Nole's U2 suddenly developed electrical troubles. The plane nosed over and began tumbling through the sky. The tail snapped off at the fuselage.

Had Only Seconds

Nole says he knew he had just seconds to squeeze out of the narrow cockpit before the plane broke up.

He shut off the jet engine. This canceled the cockpit pressure system.

At 53,000 feet the air is so thin as to be unbreatheable. Lack of ground level pressures can cause an unprotected man's blood to boil and his organs, such as heart and lungs, to explode.

Nole had a second line of defense when the cockpit pressure fell — his skin-tight, especially fitted pressure suit.

The suit automatically ballooned out. This saved his life, but curtailed his movements, making them slow and robot-like.

As the U2 flipped over, Nole's left hand flicked the switches that dropped the landing gear and extended the dive brakes.

This, he hoped, would slow the plane's increasing speed enough to permit him to bail out. At that time the U2 had no ejection seat.

Nole decided to wait until the plane was upside down again so that gravity would help pull him from the cockpit.

If the plane was going down too fast, the slipstream would become an invisible wall that would pin the pilot inside the cockpit.

"I couldn't see the tail, but I assumed that it broke off about the time I was hitting the switches.

"All this time I was talking on the radio to my mobile ground control, telling them what was happening. Some of my conversation was clear, some garbled because when the plane would turn upside down my head would hit the canopy and I'd be head down with my windpipe pinched.

"I told the ground that I did not have either elevator or rudder control and that my plane was tumbling.

"Mobile control said: 'Bail out, bail out.'

"Hell," I said. "you don't have to tell me that."

Nole made a quick disconnect of the oxygen tubes. The radio wires to his pressure suit were clicked off. The heat wires to his glass face plate were cut off. The seat safety belt and his shoulder harness were released. Reaching up he unlocked the

canopy handles which jettison the canopy.

Now the plane was upside down again. Nole's helmeted head slammed into the canopy again. This time the blow broke the canopy loose, ripping the plexiglass.

"At that time I thought the canopy had fallen away as it was supposed to," he said. "We didn't deduce until after the wreckage was found that it was my head that provided the impetus to knock off the canopy."

This was a time when every second seemed an eternity. Nole said it seemed to take forever to extricate himself from the plane. A later examination of his recorded radio messages showed it took him only about 30 seconds from the time of the electrical malfunction to the time he cleared the cockpit.

Still Not Clear

But Nole still wasn't clear of the plane.

His seat pack, containing a wide variety of survival equipment, snagged on the cockpit ledge. The slipstream banged his body against the fuselage. "There I was, bent over backwards against the fuselage, the plane going end over end. I could see the horizon coming up again and I knew the plane was coming right side up for the third time.

"I was afraid the plane might break up completely at any time. I knew I better be free when this happened.

"I thrashed around, kicked and pulled and finally came free. If you don't think you find some hidden strength at a time like that, you ought to have been in my place."

The tumbling plane's centrifugal force actually lofted Nole away from the plane.

Nole was free, but still in dreadful danger. In the confused seconds of the struggle to leave the cockpit, he couldn't find the tiny ball valve that turns on the built-in emergency supply of oxygen to his pressure suit.

"Normally, the valve was on the left side tucked into the crease between the thigh and hip. I couldn't locate it when I was going end over end with the plane."

"The valve is green. The pressure suit is green. The inside of the cockpit is green. Try looking for a little green doodad in green atmosphere sometime."

By hailing out without his emergency oxygen turned on, Nole had perhaps three minutes of air left.

There were two choices. He could make a free fall to 14,000 feet where his parachute had been pre-set to open automatically.

But it would take more than three minutes to fall that far. He would be unconscious when the chute opened. There was a good chance he'd be dead when he reached the ground, suffocated in the vacuum of his pressure suit.

"The suit is made to force oxygen into you under pressure," he said. "It is not like breathing air on the ground. In the suit, if you open your mouth, oxygen flows in and you have to make an effort to exhale."

"If I was unconscious when the chute opened, I would not be able to open the face plate of my helmet and breathe naturally."

The suit is made to hold air inside, not to let it in from the surrounding atmosphere."

The second choice was equal.

He could immediately open his parachute, find the emergency oxygen valve, and let the life-giving oxygen into the suit from a supply strapped to his leg.